



# Understanding Immigrated Korean Children's Educational Needs

by Guang-Lea Lee

*When teachers are knowledgeable about Korean culture, they can more effectively meet the needs of newly immigrated children and help them adjust to, and succeed at, school and life in the U.S.*

**K**orean children's school experiences as new immigrants to the United States are often emotionally turbulent because of environmental and psychological stresses that result when moving from one culture to another (Koh and Koh 1988). Though teachers

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may be sympathetic to adjustment problems, with some basic knowledge and some suggested approaches, they can assist these children, whose numbers are increasing, to have a successful educational experience.

Historically, Koreans have settled in major metropolitan areas, yet today they can be found also in small cities, and the influx of Korean immigrants to the United States is sizeable. During the 1990s, 568,397 persons born in Korea immigrated, an almost 100 percent increase from the 289,885 who did so during the 1980s (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

## Environmental Differences

The differences between the Korean and U.S. environments are immediately evident to newly immigrated children. In residential areas in the United States, for example, Korean children see others riding bikes around their houses. In Korea, the streets are far too crowded and busy for bike riding. In U.S. classrooms, Korean children notice that activities often involve games in which children actively participate. In Korean schools, in contrast, instruction is usually didactic, and students are expected to be passive and compliant. Even the ways that people exchange greetings are different. Korean children see people in the United States shaking hands and even hugging—both frowned upon in Korean society, where people bow to one another. All these differences are exacerbated if children are homesick.

## Psychological Differences

The psychological differences between Korea and the United States are as substantial as the environmental ones, as the children struggle to adjust to two diametrically different value systems. Most newly immigrated Korean parents try to persuade their children to develop fresh values while simultaneously retaining attributes from their native culture; however, both the children and their parents encounter serious challenges in doing so (Ford 1997; Park 1995).

At least in part, conflicts arise because Korean parents hold ambivalent and often inconsistent expectations concerning the cultural choices their children make in taking their place in U.S. life (Kim 1980). While Korean children are expected to respect and obey

their parents, U.S. values gradually affect their behavior, resulting in conflicts between them and their parents. When they do not talk softly and politely to their parents or obey their requests, children are scolded or punished. Although they cannot freely say what they want to their parents at home, they gradually learn how to speak up and express their ideas (Cheng 1998).

## The Importance of Education

To understand Korean children, it is useful to analyze their parents and the reasons they have for immigrating to the United States. Generally, Korean families immigrate for one of two reasons.

First, Korean parents take extraordinary efforts to ensure their children have every opportunity to obtain the very best education, because they regard education as the single most important factor to their children's future success (Yu 1988). They are willing to go into debt to pay for the expenses required for their children's schooling, extracurricular activities, and tutoring. Korean mothers typically arrange their schedules so that they have time to teach their children at home.

Second, many Korean parents come to the United States to complete their own advanced education at universities. Korean graduate students comprise the fourth largest group of foreign students attending U.S. universities, demonstrating their keen interest in education. Many Korean parents give up high-paying careers in Korea and move to the United States to provide better educational opportunities for their children and themselves.

Korean parents instill in their

children, early in life, that they have great expectations of them, and that their acceptance of them is contingent on their strong performance in school (Chang and Myers 1997). Kim (1988) found that expectations Korean parents have for their children's achievement often reach an unrealistically high level. In their intense desire for high achievement, parents require children to spend hours studying mathematics, English, science, and Korean when they come home from school, as well as take part in the performing arts, such as the piano or violin. Children rarely express discontent about being forced to study, because they have been taught to respect and obey their parents. They have little free time to play, because they must study with their mothers every evening—a practice typical of most Korean families, in which parents view themselves as their children's primary teachers.

## Cultural Adaptation

Teachers in U.S. schools are mindful of the increased number of Korean (and other Asian-Pacific nations) children in their classrooms and, in general, are sympathetic with the problems of adjustment these children are experiencing. In most instances, however, U.S. teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about Korean culture and Korean children to provide appropriate educational activities—largely because the information available to teachers is limited (Olsen 1997).

During the difficult and challenging process of cultural adaptation, Korean children need emotional support to make the transition from the traditions of their native culture to those of their new environment. Teachers



should learn about the differences in the two cultures and support the process (California State Department of Education 1992). The new immigrants need to learn U.S. values without having to substitute them for their Korean values. Like other first-generation immigrants, newly immigrated Korean children need to be bicultural, adding new values from their present culture while retaining those from their native culture. Biculturalism is essential if the Korean child is to build a strong psychological foundation for high self-esteem, pride, and clear identity.

Almost all newly immigrated Korean children are concerned about their lack of proficiency in the English language. Speaking and writing in English is extremely difficult for them and causes them considerable frustration. In the classroom, Korean children may sometimes speak Korean. When a teacher holds up a picture of a tree, for example, a Korean girl may say *na moo*, which is the Korean word for *tree*. At that moment, the teacher needs to reinforce the child's courage to participate rather than reject her Korean response. The child will be able to say *tree* instead of *na moo* as she improves her language skills. The teacher should not consider her response a language problem, but simply a struggle to learn to read and write in English. The student's response should be regarded as an improvement in her listening skill in

English, which enabled her to answer in Korean.

Korean children understandably feel more important and respected when they attend classrooms that contain Korean decorations, materials published in Korea, and learning activities about Korea, and where they can engage in school extracurricular activities that are relevant to their



culture. In this type of school environment, Korean children have a better opportunity to share their knowledge of Korean culture with U.S. classmates, which allows them to be proud of their Korean heritage.

Korean children benefit from any school activity that reflects their culture. When teachers recognize the importance of synchronization between school and home, it helps Korean children maintain respect for their heritage. Teachers, for example, might organize a school-wide event that highlights Korea's rich history, traditions, and

culture. At a Korea Day, students and their parents could present Korean history, culture, foods, costumes, music, stories, poems, and art. From this experience, U.S. teachers and students can learn to respect Korea's unique culture, and, at the same time, new immigrant Korean children can experience a sense of belonging.

Korean children are sometimes ridiculed by their classmates for eating their native foods, such as Kim Bob (rolled rice and vegetables with dried seaweed). After a negative encounter with their classmates, Korean children feel a disquieting distance and are often hesitant to open their lunch boxes. When such a situation develops, the teacher should demonstrate a positive curiosity about the food and discuss how the Korean diet is different from that in the United States. Also helpful is for the teacher to make

arrangements for Korean parents to share their recipes in class so that Korean children can discuss and compare how their mothers prepare similar dishes at home. Sharing Korean food after it is prepared in class is an excellent way for Korean children to develop a strong friendship and emotional bond with their teachers and fellow students.

Korean parents regard education not only as a means of success, but also as a measure of one's self-worth. As a result, Korean children feel deeply obligated to receive high grades and are imbued with

the belief that their academic success is linked to the family's reputation. This emphasis on academic achievement can create serious problems when U.S. teachers need to report to Korean parents that their children are having academic difficulty. Korean parents are reluctant to accept this information.

## Suggestions for Teachers

Following are 14 specific suggestions that teachers can use to help newly immigrated Korean children have a successful educational experience in the U.S. classroom.

1. *Encourage Korean children to be bicultural.* Let them know that it is a practical way to maintain their unique tradition and that speaking Korean at home will not interfere with their learning in school.

2. *Assure parents that using Korean language at home is not only okay, but important.* Most Korean parents want their children to continue speaking their native language, but need assurance that doing so won't interfere with learning English and attaining high levels of academic success.

3. *Avoid the assumption that all Korean children and their parents have language problems.* In fact, the rate and amount of English immigrants have acquired varies greatly. Second-generation Korean children usually do not have a problem with English. Teachers should determine each student's needs and respond accordingly.

4. *Learn about the Korean family through home visits.* Most Korean parents will not view a home visit as an intrusion. Koreans often prepare food or tea for guests, and it is customary for Korean hosts to wait for the guest to initiate eating.

5. *Become familiar with Korean cultural practices.* Korean students respect their traditional roots when the teacher shows an interest and



has a positive attitude toward the Korean culture. For example, teachers may facilitate students in learning how to greet one another by bowing, as is customary in Korea. This type of activity encourages respect for Korean heritage while helping immigrants become bicultural.

6. *Plan educational programs for Korean parents.* Though schools put tremendous pressure on children to learn English, many immigrant parents do not gain English proficiency. The gap between generations widens when children speak English but parents remain

non-English speaking. To bridge the gap, encourage parents with limited English proficiency to attend meetings or classes that teach English and U.S. culture.

7. *Be clear and firm about meeting times when arranging meetings with Korean parents.* Understand that cultural differences exist in how time is perceived. Koreans perceive time and events as an unfolding process, while Westerners perceive events independently and schedule them accordingly. Thus, Korean parents may come late for an appointment without apologizing. Help avoid problems by communicating the importance of appointment times and letting parents know that other families are scheduled before and after their designated time.

8. *Be understanding when Korean parents miss parent-teacher conferences.* Their absence may be because they work long hours or feel uncomfortable about their limited English proficiency. Teachers should take care in what they say to parents of Korean children and be careful not to criticize. As with native-born parents, it is best to talk first about the child's strengths, then about problems or weaknesses; provide a remediation plan; and, finally, ask for help and support from the parents.

9. *Make it clear that a child's academic or psychosocial problems are not a source of shame.* Some Korean parents of children who need special services in school may reject

programs such as English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual instruction because they fear their children are being stigmatized as "slow learners." Teachers should point out that these programs offer students the opportunity to maintain their Korean language without jeopardizing their learning of English and academic subjects.

10. *Learn the personal, social, cultural, and psychological background of each Korean student and family.* Sharing and communicating with families is crucial to creating a culturally sensitive environment for students and their families. By asking about family backgrounds, Korea, and Korean culture, teachers can construct a foundation of trust and acceptance with families. Use the Internet and other tools to search out local activities, community-service organizations, and historical and cultural resources for Korean-American children and families.

11. *Be aware of the Korean tradition of respect toward elders and teachers.* Korean parents highly respect school administrators and teachers, and believe that the parents' role is to listen and follow educators' professional judgments. Parents may be reluctant to participate in school functions or confer with teachers, because they are deferring to the authority of educators. Such behavior may be misconstrued as a sign of the parents' lack of interest and responsibility in school affairs. In fact, active parent involvement in class—preparing materials, assisting teachers, and supervising children—is a new experience for most Korean parents. Teachers can solve this misunderstanding by explaining to Korean parents that their involvement is welcome in school.

12. *Encourage Korean parent volunteers to play a role as mentors for newly arrived children and their families.* Korean families who have successfully made the adjustment to life in the United States can be of great help to newly arrived immigrants. Each child can be assigned a mentor who spends at least an hour each day interpreting for and helping the student.

13. *Use written communication when relaying important information to Korean parents.* Koreans learn written English in middle school, high school, and at the university level. Although they may not understand what is said verbally, they might easily comprehend written English. Thus, it is preferable to communicate with them through notes or e-mail rather than by telephone.

14. *During the first six months, send parents directions regarding what students need to do at home.* While students are adjusting to their new environment, they may not understand the teacher's directions and may sometimes behave as if they did not hear what the teacher said. If students fail to follow directions, teachers should reinforce the instructions and be careful to avoid mislabeling students as having behavioral disorders or hearing impairments.

## Toward Increased Understanding

Teachers in the United States could benefit by an increased understanding of the personal, social, cultural, and psychological background of Korean parents and their children. They should also keep in mind that needs differ depending on how long a family has lived in the United States. Teachers should communicate often with

newly immigrated Korean families and form effective partnerships with them. Through effective communication, teachers can better understand and support newly immigrated Korean parents and students, and

address their needs more effectively. Finally, teachers should use what they learn about the Korean culture to help them understand children from other Asian-Pacific nations, but be mindful that all nations from this region have unique characteristics.

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